

The Golden Triangle Retired & Senior Volunteer Program
Agriculture-Business Homeland Security Initiative
Chosen as a “Best Practice” by FEMA Region VI in the area of biodefense and
presented at the Volunteers in Homeland Security Conference of Nov 4-6, 2003
in Austin Texas..

Introduction

Texas is the nation's leading producer of cattle, sheep and goats with the Texas livestock industry being the leading segment of the state's agricultural economy. The Texas Department of Agriculture responded to the events of September 11, 2001 by forming the Texas Food Security Coalition. With the effort, Commissioner, Susan Combs put the farmer, rancher, producer groups and associations on the frontline to secure our nation's food supply. Ms. Combs stated in her 2002 Strategic Plan “a safe, reliable food supply has been and always will be, critical to our national defense. An assault on our food supply through biological weapons or the introduction of a foreign animal or crop disease or pest would be a highly destructive force that could be used against agriculture and America.” Realizing this to be especially true in Southeast Texas, local Sheriff's Departments turned to the Golden Triangle Retired & Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) to help initiate action with our local farmers, ranchers and agribusiness professionals. There are many aspects of this industry that interfere with the traditional approach to emergency preparedness. By nature, a farm or ranch is often isolated from others and encompasses large open spaces making it more vulnerable than many businesses. Farmers and ranchers must be multi-skilled and able to solve problems as they arise. They are resourceful,

practical and relatively independent thinkers. Those same assets can be a challenge in trying to convey the significance of preparedness and cooperative efforts. The organization of the Texas Food Security Coalition helped to raise the awareness of the need to work together to protect the agribusiness and our nation's food supply.

The Golden Triangle RSVP (Retired and Senior Volunteer Program) has been a division of the South East Texas Regional Planning Commission for 31 years. The Planning Commission was established in 1970 for the purpose of solving area wide problems by promoting intergovernmental cooperation and coordination, conducting comprehensive regional planning, and providing a forum for the discussion and study of area issues. We serve Jefferson, Hardin, and Orange Counties, which encompass a total population of 385,226. The region is located in Southeast Texas at the top of the Texas Gulf Coast, and shares the border with Southwest Louisiana. Agriculture in Southeast Texas, mostly centered on timber, rice and beef production; accounts for approximately 15% of the area's employment. In Jefferson County alone, the economic impact of the agriculture industry in 2001 was more than \$2.8 billion (from the food producers all the way to grocery stores and restaurants). In light of the tremendous importance of the agricultural industry in Southeast Texas, RSVP answered the request of our local Sheriffs and made this topic a high priority. Where do you start when faced with such a large issue? RSVP understood the

nature of our neighbors and the business. We needed to define the task and gather facts, and do it before there was a disaster that impacted our area.

Approach

Leila Melancon, RSVP Homeland Security Volunteer Coordinator, recruited a team of volunteers comprised of leaders in our region's agriculture community including ranch and farm owners, large animal veterinarians and an epidemiologist. We pulled representatives from; Texas A&M Extension Agency, Sheriff's Departments, USDA Farm Service Bureau, Lamar Institute of Technology, and the Beaumont Public Health Department. These volunteers came together with the purpose to research and determine the needs of our region in regard to preparedness and safety in the event of a terrorist act. It was a far-reaching problem that would need to coordinate with many agencies that are already tasked with community safety. We needed to consider the impact on existing plans and improve communication to benefit one another. So many issues and topics were being brought to the table it was difficult to determine the group's priority focus. The Committee decided to breakdown into the following smaller focus (sub-committee) groups to conduct research and report back to the larger Committee.

Education & Public Information

What information needs to be shared?

How can it be shared?

How will the information be shared if there is an event?
Will the public know how to respond?
Will the farmer or rancher recognize the signs?

Security

What tools are available to help make agribusinesses more secure?
What security issues need to be addressed?

Disease

What kind of diseases could be involved?
What are the symptoms?
What is the risk?
What is the risk to humans?

Chemical Contamination

What testing is available?
How accessible is it?
What are the chemical risks?

Disposal

How do you dispose of infected livestock or other food supplies?
Will the disposal impact the water supply?

Authority / Chain of Command

Who is notified and when?
How is this procedure included in the emergency plans of the county?

Legal / Liability

Who determines the severity of the problem and orders the destruction of private property?
What liability is there if contamination does occur?
What types of reimbursements are available?

The tasks were given to a variety of subcommittees to better define the scope and need. Through various reports of the sub-committees we discovered a need:

- to establish proper protocol and action plans for the farms and ranches
- to develop a guide for 24-hour contact information in the event of a disease outbreak, water contamination, or to report suspicious activities
- to increase awareness in the areas of symptoms and needed action for diseases that could most likely impact our area

- to reach out to the “gentlemen & lady” farmers that do not spend all week on their farms or ranches.
- to understand the impact of an event on the local water supply and possible contamination issues
- to interface effectively with current legislation directly impacting the agriculture community

Conclusions

The Committee found some emergency plans were already written and in place at the appropriate agencies addressing many of the issues brought forward, but the “end-users” (farmers & ranchers) were not easily able to access the plans; in addition the plans used highly technical terminology. The Committee concluded the most immediate need is to formulate a “pocket guide” based on local/state/federal emergency plans. This guide will be sized to allow for easy transport in an actual shirt pocket or vehicle glove compartment, allowing the user to have it available in fields or pastures. It will be brightly colored to prevent loss in an outdoor environment. The pocket guide will assist farmers and ranchers:

- to assess and appropriately respond to potential man-made and natural threats to water, animal, and food supplies;
- to respond to emergency situations;
- to increase vigilance over the security of their property;
- to understand who to contact in specific situations, i.e. a list of local, state, and federal emergency contact numbers and websites.

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Golden Triangle RSVP is a not-for-profit organization with the mission to promote the utilization of the time and talents of persons aged 55 and over as community resources. The program provides a variety of volunteer opportunities for service and participation in the life of the community. The program was founded in 1972, and currently has 1,108 members volunteering at 111 not-for-profit and governmental agencies throughout Southeast Texas.

South East Texas Regional Planning Commission (SETRPC) is a voluntary association of local governments that serves an area composed of Hardin, Jefferson and Orange Counties. SETRPC was established in June, 1970 under authority provided by the Texas Legislature in 1965, and is one of 24 Regional Planning Councils that serve all of Texas. Planning Councils were founded for the purpose of solving area wide problems by promoting intergovernmental cooperation and coordination, conducting comprehensive regional planning, and providing a forum for the discussion and study of area issues.

Senior Corps is a network of programs that tap the experience, skills, and talents of older citizens to meet community challenges with Foster Grandparents, Senior Companions, and RSVP (Retired and Senior Volunteer Program). Senior Corps is part of the USA Freedom Corps and is administered by the Corporation for National Service, the federal agency that also oversees AmeriCorps and Learn and Serve America.

Agriculture-Business Committee Members:

Alan McNeil - RSVP Volunteer, Attorney, Rancher, & Farmer
Dan Crowley - RSVP Volunteer and Communications
Calvin Irvin – RSVP Volunteer and Hazardous Materials
Dr. James Boswell – RSVP Volunteer and Retired Veterinarian
Robert Bauer – RSVP Volunteer, Cattle Rancher, Rice Farmer, President
Coastal Cattleman's Assoc.
Ruby Donahue – RSVP Volunteer, American Red Cross, & EMC
Abel Dennis – Texas Animal Health Commission Inspector
Kelby Boldt – Texas A&M Agriculture Extension Agent
Darrell Guidry – USDA
Dr. Susan Rollo – Beaumont Public Health Dept. Epidemiologist & Veterinarian
Dr. Dick Cherron – M.D., Board Member TAHC, & Rancher
Toni Spencer – Farm & Ranch Supplier
Ricky Heckaman – Rice Farmer
Wayne Wilbur – Rice Farmer
Charles Reneau – Rancher, President Independent Cattleman's Assoc.
Dennis White – Lamar Institute of Technology
Kenneth Mason – Lamar Institute of Technology
John LaBrie – City of Beaumont Clean Community Division
Jimmy Bishop – Rural Real Estate Broker
Brian Abney – Rancher, Farmer, & LEPC
Jefferson, Orange & Hardin County Livestock Officers